

PublisHer: Blanca Rosa Roca

Emma House

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Continuing her series of interviews with women in the PublisHer network, Emma House talks to the founder and CEO of Barcelona-based Roca Editorial



Blanca Rosa Roca is the founder and CEO of Roca Editorial in Barcelona, Spain. She started her career in publishing in 1976 with Grupo Zeta, and co-founded Roca Editorial in 2002 with four partners. She has been the chair of the Junta Directiva del Gremi de Editors de Catalunya, and chair of the Cambra del Llibre de Catalunya. In 1996 she received the Memorial Ferran Lara prize, awarded to editors under 40 years old.

Why did you choose publishing as a career and how did you get into publishing?

I always have read a lot, I love reading. I was studying economics at university and at the same time I was working as assistant in the newsroom of *Interviú*, the bestselling magazine in Post-Franco Spain. The stars then aligned when I started working at the big media group Grupo Zeta, which in 1986 bought Editorial Bruguera and renamed it Ediciones B. I started as publicity and promotion director of Ediciones B, and one year later I was promoted to managing director. It was a dream come true - but I didn't really know very much about the book publishing business. At my first Frankfurt Book Fair, I realised that it was a huge business and that I would have a lot to learn. I was ambitious though, and working with some brilliant people who together wanted to make Ediciones B one of the strongest publishing houses in Spain.

After the death of the chairman of Grupo Zeta in 2002, I was fired. It was the best thing that happened to me, however, and one year later, with my best colleagues at Ediciones B, I founded Roca Editorial.

Tell us about Roca Editorial now

Six of us got together in 2003 to form the independent publishing company Roca. We knew the business of books, we had great contacts in bookselling and with the literary agents, and in the press, and we were fortunate that we were the second client of a new distribution company set up by friends. We are now a team of 16 full-time employees, and we publish commercial books, crime, historical, literary, young adult, graphic novels and non-fiction.

With the Covid-19 pandemic we have encountered many difficulties because of decreased sales and returns from booksellers who were forced to close. We are also facing a globalisation of the publishing business as with other sectors. The two big Spanish groups are buying independent publishing houses in order to increase in size and gain more market share. As an independent publishing company, it is difficult to compete.



Your career has gone from strength to strength. What has been your driving force?

I love everything about publishing, from the writers to the booksellers to other publishers, and this passion has really driven me to succeed. At Roca, I have known my colleagues and partners for many years, and we work together really well. We share our love for the industry and the company, and it keeps us motivated.

You occupied two 'chair' roles at a young age. Did you encounter any challenges with this because of your gender? Or because of your age?

I was the first woman in Catalunya to occupy the position, and I was very young. Many of my colleagues were older men, who I think felt quite paternalistic towards me, and definitely challenged me. In general, everyone was very kind; in particular, in the Cambra, it was the booksellers who really helped me. As a team, we were very daring, and we ran some surprising (and somewhat shocking) campaigns which ended up being very successful.

What have been the proudest moments of your career?

There have been a few, and one was when I was fired from Ediciones B and a lot of writers wrote to me giving their support. Another proud moment was when the American author Noah Gordon, one of the bestselling authors in Spain, decided to come to be published by Roca Editorial instead of going to a big group. The economic crisis of 2006 was difficult for the company, sales were very low. In 2007 Noah Gordon published his new novel - his first one with us, which not only helped us in the economic crisis but became the pivotal moment in the life of Roca.

We are now the only independent publishing company in Spain to be distributed in Spain and Latin America by Penguin Random House.

What are the biggest challenges you have had to overcome?

Starting a new publishing company from scratch is always difficult. We had to gain the confidence and trust of authors, agents and booksellers. As an independent publishing house, we have fewer resources than the bigger multinational companies, and this makes it difficult to compete and survive in a globalised market.

Has anyone inspired you on your publishing journey?

My colleagues and business partners are a continuing inspiration to me. Others who have helped me on my journey include Riccardo Caballero, former CEO at PRH, and Nuria Cabuti, now CEO, Penguin Random House Grupo Editorial. In the US, Judy Clain at Hachette, and the authors Noah Gordon and Edward Rutherford have inspired me. Craig Russell, the Scottish author, as well as many Spanish authors have also given me a real impetus to succeed at what I do!

What is the landscape like for women in publishing in Spain? Has it changed over the years since you began?

It has changed a lot! There are many more women in publishing in Spain than there were when I started. It feels much more gender balanced, and there are notably now some fantastic women in senior management. Twenty years ago, the Sunday supplement of *El País* had three female leaders on the cover - which in those days was big news: they were Isabel Polanco (who died some years later), Ymelda Navajo, and me. I think women read more than men and have a really good 'nose' for the business.

How do you think the publishing industry can inspire and motivate more women to get into leadership roles?

Role models are very important. We see some strong female leaders in other businesses, and we are publishing the stories of some strong women, including Kamala Harris, Jacinda Ardern and Maye Musk, as well as women who fought against Nazism such as the Auschwitz librarian Dita Kraus.

I hope I am an inspiration to young women in publishing to encourage them to become leaders.

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